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SUBJECT: ROK'S RELIGIOUS LEFT/RIGHT/CENTER AND NORTH KOREA

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SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Korea's religion-based organizations have played a supporting, yet often critical role at key junctures in the nation's modern political history, from lending its organizational structure to farmers' uprisings in the 1800s to adding moral weight to the cause of democracy in the 1980s. Today's religion-based organizations appear to be maintaining that tradition. Armed with sizable bank accounts and extensive networks, organizations such as the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCKK), the Christian Council of Korea (CCK), and the Jogye Buddhist Sect have been active in shaping public discourse and policy on issues such as North-South engagement, North Korean human rights, and U.S.-ROK relations. END SUMMARY.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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[1](#)2. (SBU) Religious Studies Prof. Ryu Sung-min of Hanshin University explained to poloff that Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity were the main streams of belief shaping Korean culture and politics. At critical junctures, religion-based groups came to the fore of Korean history, such as the Donghak Movement (1800s) and the Pro-Democracy Movement (1960s-1980s). The leaders of Donghak -- an indigenous religion promoting a liberation theology based on Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Christianity -- mobilized tens of thousands of peasants around the country to protest aristocratic exploitation, and the movement is credited as the beginning of anti-Japanese/anti-foreign nationalism, which led to the birth of the March 1 Independence Movement of 1919. In the Pro-Democracy Movement, students, many of whom were Christian, led the charge against Korea's military dictatorships. Catholic and Protestant church groups avoided direct involvement in student activities but provided critical support by allowing their churches to be used as sanctuaries for dissidents. They also provided financial and legal assistance for many imprisoned students and their families and backed the popular culture movement, in which radical intellectuals published "subversive" literature, and artists created work filled with progressive political content.

13. (U) Recent surveys show that among the ROK's population of 48 million, there are 15 million Christians (12 million Protestants, 3 million Roman Catholics), 10 million Buddhists, and 0.4 million others. Twenty-two million said they practiced no religion. Korea's numerous Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist organizations span the political spectrum, depending on a given church/temple's history and leadership. However, religious doctrine per se does not appear to dictate political behavior. Gallup Korea's Chief of Election Research Heo Jin-jae told us that Gallup had, in the past, asked voters their religious affiliations during exit interviews but stopped this practice after the 1992 presidential election because there was no discernible correlation between a person's religion and voting patterns. Rather, it remained the case that regional affiliation, followed by age, was the best predictor of voting behavior, Heo said.

14. (SBU) Notwithstanding that Korea's religious communities do not exercise the same degree of political cohesiveness or clout as America's "Christian Coalition," they do constitute a respectable political force. According to Prof. Kang Won-taek of Soongsil University, churches were able to play an important supporting role in the Pro-Democracy Movement because Christians were ubiquitous, cohesive, organized, well-funded, and respected throughout Korean society. Thus, the authoritarian governments were reluctant to interfere with church activities for fear of a middle class backlash, which viewed the church as a symbol of moral respectability. Using their unique status, Korea's Christian community weighed in for freedom and democracy. Indeed, Cardinal Stephen Kim Sou-hwan is credited with having been instrumental in the democracy movement because he not only spoke out against human rights and other abuses during the Park Chung-hee regime (1961-79), he also decreed that Catholic churches would give sanctuary to fugitive pro-democracy activists.

15. (SBU) Although the Catholic Church in Korea has receded into the background of the political landscape in recent years, Cardinal Nicholas Cheong Jin-suk stated that the Korean Catholic community would continue to provide humanitarian aid to North Korea. (NOTE: As the Archbishop of Seoul, Cheong is automatically the apostolic administrator for Pyongyang. END NOTE.) The Diocese of Seoul has been providing over USD 1 million in food and humanitarian aid annually for more than ten years. The Cardinal, however, expressed reservations about the one-sided aid provisions. Korea's Protestant churches, in contrast, have been even more active over the years. In 2005, Korean Protestant churches sent more than 14,000 missionaries abroad, making the ROK the second largest source of missionaries after the United States. Moreover, a number of these churches have ventured beyond mere proselytizing in order to advance their agendas for two distinctly political missions: North-South reunification and North Korean human rights.

#### CHRISTIAN LEFT

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16. (SBU) Among the most politically active religion-based groups is the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK). Founded in 1905, the NCCK is the largest progressive Christian umbrella group and claims that its member churches account for 5 million of the ROK's churchgoers. (NOTE: Our sense is that this number is exaggerated. END NOTE.) NCCK Secretary General Rev. Paik Do-wong said the organization

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was well-known for working among Korea's urban poor, farmers, and laborers during the 1960s and 1970s and for fighting the military dictatorships. Conscientious Christians had formed the group, Paik said, and claimed among its numbers dissident leaders (and later presidents) Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung. Today, the NCCK continued its human rights work by

advocating labor rights, gender equality, and, most importantly, Korean reunification.

¶17. (SBU) A strong and early supporter of the North-South engagement policy, the NCKK actively supports the ROKG's position that North Korea's human rights situation is best addressed through practical measures such as food aid and economic cooperation. Like other progressive elements supportive of engagement with the DPRK, the NCKK believes that those calling for more vocal criticism of North Korea are politicizing human rights in order to bring about regime change. It is highly critical of the USG's "hardline" approach to the DPRK nuclear issue and actively seeks to sway public opinion through demonstrations, op-ed pieces in newspapers and on the Internet, and educational seminars.

¶18. (SBU) Progressive religion-based organizations target North Korea through indirect methods such as organized prayers. Since 1988, the NCKK and the Korea Christian Federation (KCF), the NCKK's partner in North Korea, have observed the annual joint "South-North Common Prayer Sunday for Peace and Unification" on the Sunday preceding the August 15 National Independence Day. The KCF is one of four members of the DPRK's Korean Religionist Council, which also includes the Korea Buddhist Federation, Korean Catholic Association, and Korean Cheondoist Association. The Korean Religionist Council was founded in 1989 under the pretext of peaceful reunification but most critics believe the DPRK government formed it as a means to secure foreign aid.

#### CHRISTIAN RIGHT -----

¶19. (SBU) Christian Council of Korea (CCK) leads Korea's Christian right. Established in 1989, CCK Human Rights Committee Chairman Rev. Soh Kyung-suk claimed the CCK accounted for 80 percent of Korea's Protestant churches. (NOTE: As with figures provided by the NCKK, a likely exaggeration. END NOTE.) He regretted the conservative churches' silence during the military dictatorships, but stated the organization was now actively pursuing issues from the center. One of its goals, Soh said, was to organize a Christian-based voter awareness group that was as active as the U.S. Christian Coalition, but different in that it would focus on social and economic issues, not moral issues.

¶10. (SBU) The CCK and other conservative religious groups represent a counterbalance to far-left ideologies, Rev. Soh stated. For example, concerned that the new Roh Administration was anti-American, the group organized a peaceful 100,000-person-strong demonstration in 2004 to show support for the U.S.-ROK alliance. It was the largest pro-American gathering Korea had seen in decades. More recently, the CCK flexed its muscle in response to the government's passage of a law that would create greater external oversight of private schools, many of which are affiliated with Christian churches (REF A). Working in conjunction with the conservative Grand National Party (GNP), the CCK organized numerous mass demonstrations in Korea's major cities to demand that the government retract the law. Although the government ultimately prevailed, observers pointed out that the episode demonstrated anew the religious right's ability to mobilize its forces. It also reaffirmed the CCK's alliance with the GNP.

¶11. (SBU) Rev. Soh asserted the CCK and other conservative Christian groups forced the North Korean human rights situation into the public spotlight through vigils and large-scale international conferences. CCK recently worked with the Freedom House to organize last year's "Seoul Summit: Promoting Human Rights in North Korea" (REF B). Funded by the USG per the North Korea Human Rights Act, the conference attracted thousands of international human rights campaigners, Christian activists, politicians, and North Korean defectors. By contrast, progressive religious and civic groups such as the NCKK studiously avoided, if not outright condemned, the conference as unhelpful to North-South reunification. Critics have accused conservative

Christians of using North Korean human rights to evangelize and of sending converted North Koreans back to the DPRK to secretly proselytize.

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¶12. (SBU) Religion-based organizations operating at the grassroots level in China are almost all conservative Christian groups, said Prof. Kang. An estimated 1,500 South Korean missionaries are deployed evangelizing secretly and illegally among the Han Chinese, ethnic Korean Chinese, and North Korean border crossers in China. (NOTE: Korean-American missionaries are also very active in China and sometimes work in concert with Korean missionaries. END NOTE.) Missionaries and religion-based organizations have helped North Korean border crossers with food, shelter, and transit to South Korea via third countries at a cost of approximately USD 2,000-3,000 per beneficiary. (NOTE: Many missionaries absorb the entire cost while some professional brokers can charge as much as USD 10,000. END NOTE.) In South Korea, religious groups run social welfare programs targeting resettled North Koreans. Jayoutuh ("Freedom Place"), for instance, a Christian affiliated educational organization, offers academic and social assistance for resettled North Korean students who face unique educational challenges due to lost classroom time while living in China and third countries or difficulty adjusting to a South Korean curriculum.

#### BUDDHIST CENTRISTS

¶13. (SBU) Korean Buddhists generally maintain the most centrist political and social positions. Of the 28 Buddhist sects, the Jogye Order is the wealthiest and largest. It controls a yearly budget of about USD 23.3 million and oversees 15,000 monks and nuns affiliated with 3,000 temples across the country. The Jogye Order contributed USD 145,000 to the ROKG's Hurricane Katrina relief package and, because of its influence, its leaders are sometimes seen in the company of senior Korean politicians. (NOTE: The Venerable Bubjang (1941-2005), head of the Jogye Order from 2003-2005 and responsible for getting the first nun on the Jogye Council, called on former Special Envoy for the DPRK nuclear issues Joseph DeTrani and EAP A/DAS David Straub to discuss North Korea. When he passed away last fall, President Roh Moo-hyun stated that Bubjang had "contributed greatly to North-South reconciliation and cooperation through his visits to North Korea." END NOTE.)

¶14. (SBU) The Venerable Hae-yong, Deputy Director of Social Affairs for the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, explained that Buddhists were less vocal compared to their Christian counterparts and thus were viewed as being apolitical. Although Korean Buddhism had become a "quiet" religion with a focus on lifestyle, Buddhists were also a force to contend with because of its potential to mobilize.

¶15. (SBU) In recent years, Buddhist activism has increased. Good Friends is a Buddhist-based NGO committed to promoting North-South reconciliation and refugee assistance. It assists North Korean defectors in the ROK and North Korean border crossers in China with humanitarian aid. In addition, Good Friends publishes reports based on its own independent research in China conducted along the PRC-DPRK border to assess the realities of life in North Korea and the North Korean displacement situation in China. The ROK National Assembly has called on the group to testify on the status of North Koreans in China.

#### COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) A usually quiet, but often potent, presence in Korean politics, Korea's religion-based organizations -- especially evangelical Christians and the Buddhists -- have emerged as stakeholders in the debate over North-South relations, North Korean refugees, and North Korea human

rights. As these issues assume greater prominence in the public consciousness, Korea's religion-based communities hope to seek a higher profile in Korean politics and expand their assistance to North Korean border crossers. They are also likely to intensify their outreach to like-minded organizations in the United States, China, and elsewhere. END COMMENT.  
VERSHBOW